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SUBJECT: "Harm Reduction" Debate Politicizing INCB Elections?

REF: A) 02/18/09 Davis Email to Pala,B) UNVIE Vienna 110

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a meeting on May 6, Koli Kouame Secretary of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), expressed dismay over what he described as the NGO efforts to politicize the election of Board members. More specifically, Kouame believes the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) is attempting to influence the outcome of the INCB's May 18 elections in New York by using candidates' positions on "harm reduction" as a litmus test to "modernize" and "bring new skills and perspectives" to the Board. Kouame is concerned that INCB's mandate to monitor compliance with the international drug control conventions could be undermined from the inside if IDPC efforts succeed in inserting new Board members favorable to their cause. Furthermore, Kouame hopes the U.S. will support the re-election of the sole U.S. Board member, (retired) Ambassador Melvin Levitsky, whom Kouame praised for protecting the international drug control regime, as defined in the drug conventions. In a subsequent phone conversation with missionoff, Ambassador Levitsky seconded many of the concerns Kouame raised. He expressed a desire to have a Board whose foremost priority is to protect the drug conventions. END SUMMARY.

INCB May Elections in NY

¶2. (SBU) On May 6 missionoff met with Koli Kouame, Secretary of the INCB, to discuss the upcoming election of six board members at the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in New York on May 18. Five government-backed candidates will be elected and one person will be chosen from the WHO field of candidates. (Note: The Board comprises thirteen members. Ten are chosen from government-backed candidacies and three are reserved for candidates from the WHO. Members serve five year terms and are free to run for re-election. Terms begin one year after election; thus the six winners from this year's pool will begin their term in May, 2010. Members serve in the personal capacities and are expected to be independent. End note.)

Harm Reduction: a Litmus Test for NGO support

¶3. (SBU) Kouame expressed concern over the manner in which NGOs and certain member states are coordinating with each other on which candidates to support. Kouame handed missionoff emails that he said he received from a "New York colleague." The emails, from Mike Trace of the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), are addressed to a number of Vienna-based delegations, including Brazil,

Bulgaria, Netherlands, New Zealand, Romania, and the UK. Trace lists the candidates he believes will "modernize" the Board and bring "new skills and perspectives," and therefore the addressees should support. He also lists candidates whom addressees should oppose, and still others on whom he has acquired insufficient information to make an assessment. (Note: The IDPC is an NGO consortium which seeks to advance "more humane approaches to drug control." Among other positions, IDPC is an outspoken proponent of "harm reduction"--a controversial term that could include prescription heroin, drug injection rooms and the legalization of drug abuse. Mike Trace is the former UK Deputy Drug "Czar" and current Co-Director of the Beckley Foundation, another pro-harm reduction organization that questions the validity of the current drug control regime. Scanned copies of the emails, and their assessments of the various candidates, will be forwarded to INL/PC. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) The assessments divide the candidates into three categories: i) those who should be supported; ii) those who should be opposed; and iii) "other candidates" without sufficient evidence for assessment. The emails assert that an unnamed "human rights agency" conducted the assessment. Kouame was alarmed by the tone of some of the assessments. For example, current Board member Tatyana Dmitrieva, a Russian national up for re-election, is accused of not being truly independent of the Russian government. (Note: Russia is a vociferous opponent of "harm reduction" measures, including medication-assisted therapies like methadone. End note.) Even worse, the assessment implicates Dmitrieva in possible human rights abuses at a psychiatric institute.

¶5. (SBU) The assessment also finds objectionable Colombian national Camilo Uribe Granja, another current Board member up for

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re-election, because in his role as director of a U.S. Embassy Bogota study on the health impact of herbicide spraying campaigns where he apparently concluded that there was no valid evidence of adverse health consequences. Uribe is also maligned as a proponent of Colombia's drug legislation which criminalizes possession for personal consumption, and requires compulsory treatment of drug users. Of the other four candidates deemed objectionable, their opposition to "harm reduction" is highlighted.

¶6. (SBU) On the other hand, the assessment urge support for candidates like Kamil Kalina of Czech Republic, because, "according to NGO sources he is a supporter of harm reduction." (Note: Kalina, a psychotherapist, is the Chair of the EU horizontal group on drug issues in Brussels. During the 2008-2009 UNGASS negotiations in Vienna, Kalina came across as a pragmatist, attempting repeatedly to steer the EU to accept the exclusion of the term "harm reduction" in the recent 2009 UNGASS Political Declaration, Ref A and B. Such efforts by Kalina and the Mission were unable to sway the "harm reduction" lobby in the EU. In the end, the EU was split on this issue. End note.) In addition, Poland's Janusz Sieroslawski is also a "good" candidate because, "according to local NGO contacts, [he] supports sound public health and human rights-based approaches to drug policy."

"Politicization" of INCB Lamented

¶7. (SBU) While Kouame acknowledged that there has always been lobbying for candidates, he found disturbing what he called "borderline character assassinations" in the current campaigns, and the mysterious sources that were supplying such information to Trace and the member states. He claimed not to have seen anything so explicitly political as the assessments of candidates in these emails, lamenting that in the past decade drug issues have become more political and less technical. Indeed, the term "harm reduction" is opposed by a great number of member states precisely because it is so vague and politically-loaded. However, this issue seems to preoccupy the email authors.

¶8. (SBU) Kouame also alleged that the usual horse-trading is going on. He claimed that India recently announced the withdrawal of

Krishna Verma ("assessed" as objectionable due in part to his opposition to "harm reduction") as the government candidate, in exchange for support for Rajat Ray for one of the three WHO seats. Ray was "assessed" as a clear supporter of "harm reduction"). India, Kouame argued, wants an Indian national on the board, and is willing to drop their objectionable candidate if it means shoring up support for their WHO candidate.

Balance of Board, Integrity
of Conventions in Danger

¶9. (SBU) Kouame stressed that the next few years are critical for the INCB. The international drug control regime has been under assault, he alleged, starting in the late 1980's, and increasingly so in the past ten years. He is concerned that with the election of six members this year (plus another in September to replace the retiring Mexican board member), the dynamics of the INCB could dramatically shift towards positions he considers insufficiently dedicated to the primacy of the drugs conventions. Kouame noted that while INCB President Hamid Ghodse (encumbering a WHO seat) and retired U.S. Ambassador Melvin Levitsky (encumbering a government-backed position) will continue to push for strong interpretations of the conventions, they will be outnumbered if Trace and his allies are successful in having their candidates elected.

¶10. (SBU) Kouame asserted that what the INCB needs most urgently are strong international lawyers and law enforcement officials for the Board, who understand the obligations of the conventions and the effectiveness of their implementation on the local and national stage. In his view, there are currently too many doctors and scientists on the Board. Kouame also expressed a hope that the U.S. will re-nominate Ambassador Levitsky when his term ends in 2012.

A USG Plan?

¶11. (SBU) In a subsequent telephone conversation, Ambassador Levitsky concurred that the past several years have seen a marked increase in the politicization of the INCB elections. In his view,

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the "harm reduction" advocates do not dare attack the conventions, so they have been trying to whittle them down with new interpretations emanating from the Board. Without going into specifics, Ambassador Levitsky expressed hope that all members of the INCB, current and future, would focus on protecting the primacy of conventions. He also hoped that the USG and other member states would take these assessments seriously and would examine the records and qualifications of the candidates, in order to develop a considered position on the candidates. With regard to whether he would run for re-election, Ambassador Levitsky dismissed any speculation, saying it was too early to worry.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The NGO assessments clearly focus on the candidates' "harm reduction" and law enforcement approaches to drug users, paying scant attention to their educational and professional qualifications. Such politicizing approach is telling of ongoing and coordinated attempts to re-shape international drug policy we also saw during the United Nations General Assembly Special Session. Mission agrees with Kouame that the proper way to change the international drug control regime is to amend the conventions. Instead, the NGOs and the European countries that support them, are trying to side-step this process. They failed in their attempt to insert "harm reduction" in the 2009 UN Political Declaration on fighting drugs. Now, it appears, they are trying, through the INCB elections, to subvert the international drug control regime from the inside out. END COMMENT.

